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# What Our Country Churches Need .....

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By  
George Frederick Wells



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**WHAT OUR COUNTRY  
CHURCHES NEED**

ART. III.—WHAT OUR COUNTRY CHURCHES NEED<sup>1</sup>

I. BEFORE it can be said that our country churches need anything it must be shown that society needs the country churches. Some people think there is no place for country churches. They are said to be out of date. They have done their work. Like worn out carriages or dilapidated buildings, they are not worth the space they occupy. The sooner they are disposed of the better. Some expert students of social problems hold just this opinion. Edward Pearson Pressey says that the churches are hopeless and helpless. He thinks that if there is any place for the country church it must be greatly supplemented by an idealistic system of industrial and domestic education as represented by his New Clairvaux, or arts and crafts school at Montague, Massachusetts. This is a Utopian combination of home, factory, farm, an ideal town organization, and a school of trades and sciences. Rollin Lynde Hartt seems to believe that the usual form of the church may well be displaced by the country social settlement with religious features. Such a settlement would be a combination of farm, factory, hotel, coöperative store, library, and a bureau of social research and instruction. Something like his idea is embodied in the Church Settlement Association of New Hampshire, at Elmwood, near Concord. The theories of Pressey and Hartt certainly have great suggestive and educative value. But while Pressey's is as unpractical—even his experimental enterprise—as would be the effort to raise America's wheat crop in New England greenhouses, there are only two difficulties with Hartt's idea. In the first place, it absolutely cannot be realized, and, in the second place, we already have what is better. One might as well expect to plant and grow prosperous cities, like the forty best in the United States, in Sahara Desert as to make a success of extensive social settlements in decadent country towns which, for the most part, ought never to have been anything but

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<sup>1</sup> A discussion based upon a study of the country church problem made by the author under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution at Washington, Department of Economics and Sociology to which acknowledgment is made for the use of data.

productive timber orchards. On the other hand, in towns that ought to live the usual agencies of church, school, grange, club, town library, and the various recreational and commercial or industrial organizations, all in normal interaction, are doing more to make rural society large, beautiful, and worthily human than could be possible for any scheme not of the people's own choosing. Social evolution, as a method of interpreting social facts, cannot do everything, but it ought to teach one that radical theories cannot cause the sun to rise at midnight. Newell Dwight Hillis, of Brooklyn, and many others believe that the rural institutional cathedral church ought to, and will in time, take the place of our country churches in their ordinary form. This would seem a consummation devoutly to be wished. Perhaps this will actually mark the program of the development of the largest and most potent stream of organized rural Christianity. In regard to the spiritual nature and work of the church it would have the advantage of keeping the emphasis in the right place. The personal factor would not be betrayed, for there would seem to be great practical wisdom in having a senior preacher for expert leadership and his assistant pastors and deaconesses for more direct personal service to the remotest country neighborhood and home.

Such suggestions and experiments are of great worth to rural religious work and life. They are a timely rebuke to some dead rural churches. But with the rapid increase in our communities of the Grange, the Young Men's Christian Association, the fraternal lodges and literary clubs, farmers' institutes, and village improvement societies, to say nothing of the work of improved schools and numerous town libraries and the influence of the rural telephone and trolley, free mail delivery, and the increased circulation of the daily press, I believe that the country church is less and less called upon to do organized social work. When rural society becomes well adjusted to the responsibilities of the new industrial type of life even modest country institutional churches will not be very common. The successful country church today is the one that knows how to be a consistent church, true to its Christian professions, realizing its essential moral mission to the whole of society, minding its own spiritual and ethical affairs first

of all, and then strong enough and sensible enough to coöperate, for the church is a social institution, with other social institutions that stand for any aspect whatever, however secular, of the kingdom of God among men. Whatever form or name it may take, the country church of the future will be more and more specialized as it becomes more and more alive to the spiritual and ethical enlightenment and leadership of the complete mass of rural society. But what a few students and writers say or reflect against the church is of slight importance. What should give us deeper concern is the attitude of the people as a whole. Too many people in most of our towns by their habits of not attending church are saying that the church is no good. They do not contribute of their means toward the support of the church. Their indifference deprives them of the weekly blessing of changing their clothes. They need moral quickening as much as though they lived in the wilds of Africa. In too many cases distance from the church or the low moral standards of church people in the common walks of life are no restraint to lives of open immorality and shame. It would be a relief if the lukewarmness of some might be awakened to even ribald opposition. One of the best helpers in church work I ever knew was an uncomfortable skeptic who would hail people on the street to curse and ridicule union revival services then in progress. Some people who grind their unhappy lives away for the almighty dollar, if their minds were not as small as their souls, might well be asked, "What would real estate be worth in Sodom?" The graft of professional mendicants upon the charities of city rescue missions is not so exasperating as to have well-to-do country people, as is often the case, demand Christian burial for the members of their families at the expense of time, patient care, and sometimes travel to distant places on the part of faithful ministers, who would be harshly criticised if they did not show the general culture and special training worth valuable years in the schools and thousands of money, and yet these ungrateful, misplaced souls help the church or parson directly or indirectly by never a cent. But all this is a matter of cultivation, of civilization, in which the church should be the leader. She should not complain because there is something yet for her to do. If what



a few social workers say is a rebuke to dead churches, the inaction of multitudes of perverse minds should be a Macedonian cry to every church that knows the first principles of Christian living.

But what about the multitudes of ministers, and other once faithful and intelligent workers in the churches, who have become discouraged, losing faith in the churches? It is very easy for young men of scholarly inclinations, who must of necessity drink deeply at the fountains of history, science, philosophy, and theology in lives of strenuous devotion to books and theories, to allow knowledge to crowd experience from its proper place, devotion to the truth of theology to leave no room for the service of love, the religion of idealism to dethrone the happy fruition of the redemption of an infinite Christ. This is a suggestion of the way in which some students and preachers may have lost grip upon themselves, so that the trellis of thought stands cold and alone without the beauty of the living vine of joyous, throbbing reality. Forgetting the gospel of Paul and Luther, Chalmers and Wesley, Kingsley and Spurgeon, they have preached theories, or a philosophy that cannot regenerate, in the place of a gospel that interprets life as love, makes manhood complete, and society a paradise. It is no wonder that when preachers and people forsake personal Christian service, and have more concern for "salvation by statistics" than for regeneration through a personal Christ, they have the opportunity of reading and listening to poetic essays in congregations more and more wooden with empty benches. Is it any wonder that such men—and they are laymen as well as clergymen—lose faith in and leave the churches they have thus devitalized? Philosophy and science are not to be despised in the service of the church, but they must be crowned by the golden fruits of faith. But there is a more practical side to this matter. It comes to us as the supreme practical challenge of the church in this age. Whenever a preacher says, "I am tempted to leave the ministry, because I seem unable to do the work of a minister," it makes a person both angry and ambitious. He is angry that the theological seminaries do not teach sociology as well as theology, about men and the world as well as about God and heaven. But nothing is more strikingly true, and as pathetic as true, than

that our theological faculties cannot teach what nobody knows. And then one is fired with ambition to know the problem in a large, true way, as no one yet can really profess to have gained such knowledge. Theology cannot presume to teach us all that is essential to be known about the church, which is so largely a human organization. Sociology cannot formulate all of our knowledge concerning the church, the largest concerns of which are realized only in the skies. Social evolution is necessary as a method of study—though it is limited, for neither men nor churches can be measured by a knowledge of their environment. So each discouraged worker must follow his best light, and work and wait, with zeal and patience, through the dawning hours of the truer interpretation. If the need of the country churches is to be measured by the possibilities that lie in them, then that need is very great. More than one half of the total population of the United States will have their religious and moral instruction and leadership directly or indirectly from the country churches or they must remain destitute. Aside from this fact it must not be forgotten that the ethical quality of modern city life depends to a very large extent upon the quality of manhood and womanhood our country parishes are producing. It is true that both the cream and the scum of the country go to the city. Our country churches feed the city churches, and at the same time our rural weaklings and degenerates fill the city saloons, and replenish the slums, and greatly enhance the urban problem of the submerged tenth. I believe there is no other institution that actually has, in spite of its faults and misfortunes, so great a potentiality, and thus mission and responsibility, in maintaining the moral integrity of the American people as the country church.

II. In the next place it is useless to talk about what our country churches need to make them entirely efficient if it can be shown that they have no needs and are not deficient in results. If a person is in perfect health and is doing his full amount of work, he certainly needs no physician. There are many people and preachers who think that if church attendance remains constant and there are no losses in church membership, the churches are all right. Perhaps some will be so fair as to set their standard

at maintaining a constant relation between church membership and the population of the town. Viewed from this standpoint there are indeed many churches that are not failing in their hold upon the people. But the question is, Are they making positive gains? To be satisfied with being equal to the past is lazy nonsense in such a progressive age as ours. And then the church is not made responsible for a select part of society, but for the whole of it.

Let us look somewhat carefully at both sides of this question of the progress of the church. On the side of progress let us be encouraged that one presiding elder has recently said in regard to New England Methodism: "Let me state as a profound conviction that our times are not worse than former times." But should we not be profoundly stirred because they are not much better than former times? Indeed there are some indications of healthy increase. The Rev. W. F. English, Ph.D., of Connecticut, has recently said: "While naturally and inevitably some churches have lost in members and opportunity for service, the church membership in relation to population has gained, a more intensive spiritual culture has been promoted, and a new country church has been developed by the very stress of circumstances." After a somewhat extensive comparative study of figures and of expert opinions I am convinced that the social problem of the church today in New England is not so great as at any previous time in fifty years. In making this statement the statistics of church membership and attendance are considered as the chief measure of the problem. In spite of these encouraging things there is an immense danger of a too easy optimism. There are still as many tasks as rewards for the rural churches. Let those listen to the following remarks who think we are ready for a millennial jubilee. The Rev. C. E. Hayward says in *Institutional Work for the Country Church*: "But few country churches can be said to be in a flourishing condition; the majority are hardly holding their own, some are losing ground, all are struggling heroically for life, but the tide is against them; something must be done. In fact, some country churches have a constituency so heterogeneous that it becomes practically a mission field." The Rev. Henry Fairbanks, Ph.D., has said of rural conditions, after

a very extensive first-hand investigation: "The danger of relapse into barbarism in these districts is not due to immigration. Those now growing up in the mountain towns will go out to be leaders of men, and it is a fact of fearful import that the gospel is not reaching them. A majority of our people are never at church. Of those living two miles or more from church, only about one third attend church. In the rural districts of New England and New York, from which the strongest men in the cities and West are coming, more than half of the people are not only unreached but are absolutely unapproached by any direct Christian efforts." President Hyde, of Bowdoin College, said a few years since in an article entitled "Impending Paganism in New England": "New England today is confronted with the danger that the country village will be the first to lapse from vital Christianity; . . . that rusticity will again become synonymous with godlessness and superstition." In the summer of 1905 I found that in one New England state, in fifteen average rural towns, having a total of twenty-five churches, the average church attendance was only 13.7 per cent of the town population. Less than one seventh of the people were regularly at church! The average church attendance in four urban towns, one of them being the state capital, was 33 per cent of the total population. These figures certainly are not encouraging. I think we are ready to grant that the country needs the churches, they being the sole means, directly or indirectly, in the moral and religious quickening and cultivation of the people. Neither will we deny that the churches themselves need to be greatly reënforced before they will be able to perform their whole mission—that of spiritualizing rural society.

III. Now we are ready to ask the question, What do the country churches so need that, if this were supplied, they would be able to fulfill their complete mission? By this question we mean to inquire for the one primary need of the churches. The first answer that will usually be given to this question is that more money is the great need of the rural churches. The members of all churches need their societies to be free from debt, or else they need to pay larger salaries to better preachers. In Vermont five sevenths of the demand for church union and federation

arises from economic necessity. In one district in New England I found eighteen out of twenty average rural clergymen positively limited in their usefulness by inadequate financial support. The need of money is emphasized when faithful people cannot pay as much as they wish toward the church, and too often those who are abundantly able to give are without the inclination. But the financial need of country churches is not primary, however necessary. It is possible that churches with the most money may be the least helpful to society. Poor churches and people alike may be the richest in faith, good works, and noble characters. The mission of the church being what it is, and human nature being as it is, the usefulness of the church is sure not to increase in proportion to the increase of its money. Large endowments for country churches are not advisable. Francis Minton has said of the rural endowments of England: "Evidence appears to lead to the conclusion that endowments are a mistake. The endowment artificially keeps the institution alive, when, if left to the natural environment, it would die. Better that it should die in the natural course than to outlive its usefulness." It matters not how destitute and in distress our churches and ministers may be, money is at best only an incidental necessity and not a primary requirement. There is something else, which, if it is supplied, the money problem will be solved. A great many people believe that the primary need of country churches is an improved clergy. Some have said: "Give us an adequate clergy and our churches will be all right; otherwise not." I will agree with the "otherwise not," but we cannot put the full responsibility of successful churches upon the shoulders of the ministers, especially when 90 per cent of them do not have enough upon which to live. Someone has said that the great need of the churches is no ministers at all, at least until the churches can learn that some ministers are first men, then ministers. A Catholic woman once told her little girl, speaking of a certain pastor: "He is not a man, he's a minister." If a mistaken churchism had not been responsible for the remark, it would have been an insult. The hardest thing that the ministry as a class has to endure is that they are treated artificially, as though they were trying to do a work that is aside from normal

human needs. Bishop Hendrix is doubtless right in saying that "the honor of the temple has never survived the honor of the priest." The first responsibility of spiritual and social leadership in the church rests with the clergymen. But where are the ministers to come from? There is as yet no patent process for the manufacture of ministers to order and warranted to suit. Ministers grow, like other men, in the homes of the people. The church, after all, is the father of its clergy. It is doubtless true that the ministry is the chief channel through which the fundamental need of the country churches is to be supplied. "But we cannot have churches without people," someone is sure to say. This statement is not so trite as it may at first seem. There are several causes which are right, and even beneficial in their larger influence, even though their first effect is to rob the churches of their people. For instance, the centralization of industry has drawn the people from the smaller to the larger towns, and abandoned towns certainly cannot have full churches. The freedom in Protestantism of the private interpretation of revelation has led to the rise of the denominations, and where churches multiply faster than the people the process of division is inevitable. But in the main the trouble is not that there are not enough people for the churches in rural communities, for, as a rule, half of the rural people are even now outside of the churches. There is another side to this matter. Since it is the work of the church to give the religious character to all the members of rural society, and to spiritualize all social forces, it is possible for the social problem of the church to be very great even though all the people were regular church attendants. Quantity is not always the measure of quality. Although there can be no church without people, there is something which the church, as a nucleus of people, may have in order that to draw and hold and help will be the rule and not the exception. There are various specialized forms of social, educational, and religious enterprise that are sometimes advocated as sufficient, each in itself, for the solution of all church problems. For instance, one specialist may stand for evangelism, as though this alone would bring all churches to Christian completeness without the use of other forms of enterprise. Another

may think that church federation is the one thing needful. The third believes in the so-called institutional activities as sufficient to unite earth and heaven. Each of these alone may have been seen to realize in some church the highest ends this side of heaven, but such could happen only when the other needs of the church were already provided. The specialist has his place so long as he does not become a monopolist; then life is too large for his cistern, and he becomes a relic.

After all, the one simple primary need of the church today is hardly a need on the part of the church at all. The church, though it has a mission, is no mendicant. The need is on the part of the people, especially those who are outside of the churches, that they wake up to a proper sense of values. If a half, or more, of the rural population are not themselves a part of the church, it is because they are like the woman who grumbles because the schools do not educate her children when she keeps them at work all of every day in her own back yard. It is the old fallacy of the blind man's complaining because the sun does not shine. The man who calls the church "a graft on society for the support of the ministry" is an impudent vagabond, too mean to eat the feast of his life when it is already set before him. He forgets that the church is the only voluntary institution which deals in the richest values of two worlds. He is too busy with the muck rake to enjoy the beautiful flowers that he expects will grow where he has planted no seed. But they are already fragrant in his neighbor's garden. He has not waked up to a proper sense of values. When one truly becomes alive to the correct sense of values he just then begins to appreciate what the church really is. "Values" is just the word we want. *The church is a fellowship of men in the use and enjoyment of religious and ethical values.* In this economic age we ought to be able to understand the church when it is thus defined. Economics treats of the adjustment of life to the wherewithal of life. The economics of the church treats of the wherewithal of the spiritual life in the terms of moral and religious values, the only eternal commodities that have a price. When we pay for the church with time and cash, if we appreciate what we are doing, we are only investing in one set of values in

the same way as, at the real estate market, the playhouse or the university, we invest in other sets of values. How hard and yet how easy is the task of appreciation! Now we can relate the things which seem to the things which are; things partial to the one whole. The church does not primarily need money, but the people need appreciation, or the proper sense of values. There need be no trouble because the minister lives at the expense of the people when it is seen that he is their servant. He creates their highest joys by interpreting the values that abide. The people will not be divorced from the church when they can realize that it is the mediator of the highest powers of character. The people need the church infinitely more than the church needs the people. Our willful sinning keeps us from the throne room of the King. This is as true negatively as positively. It as naturally faces the problem as the ideal. The great problem is that the church too often is not the church—a problem in reality. If there was an appreciation and appropriation of the values for which the true church stands the study of the genius loci of so-called churches would not so often reveal that they were mere social clubs, standing for anything and everything but spiritual excellence in the lives of men. The problem of leadership would be solved. Men would seek their guides from among their own number in the choice spirits that are tuned by nature, by training, and by grace to catch the music of the world of which the present is only an echo. Sectarian ambition, though not necessarily denominational organization, would soon give place to the true spirit of brotherhood in service. And that service would be so free, so helpful and whole-hearted that the machinery of the church would soon fade into the established habits of mankind in the arts of mutual love. The world is nearly as responsible for such an awakening as can be the militant church. The dissatisfied classes ought to learn by experience that they have followed the wrong god long enough.

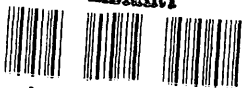
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